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Rapping Postcoloniality: Akala's "The Thieves Banquet" and Neocolonial Critique

Justin A. Williams

ABSTRACT

MC/rapper, public speaker, journalist, graphic novelist, and founder of the Hip-hop Shakespeare Company, Akala (b. Kingslee James Daley, 1983) is one of the rappers at the forefront of the UK's thriving hip-hop scene. His lyrics and music demonstrate an awareness of history and, in particular, the British Empire's shameful past as global colonizer and profiteer of the slave trade. Focusing on his album *The Thieves Banquet* (2013), this article investigates Akala's engagement with postcolonial thinking and neocolonial critique through the use of Western classical music tropes and multi-accentuality to create hybrid counter-narratives reflective of 21st-century global power relations.

Yinka Shonibare's Britannia

After the redevelopment of the London-based Tate Britain art museum in 2001, artist Yinka Shonibare, MBE, was invited to costume the statue of Britannia in front of the original façade of the building. Maeve Kennedy, reviewing the event for the *Guardian* newspaper, acknowledged the complex roots and routes of such a project: "He chose to reflect the colonial antecedents of a gallery founded on the Tate and Lyle sugar fortune, and has dressed her in streaming banners of brilliant 'African' textiles—manufactured in Holland and England for export to Africa but bought at Brixton market in south London." Shonibare is a British-Nigerian artist associated with the Young British Artists of the 1990s. His work is often characterized by re-creating scenes or paintings using "African" textiles or Africanizing sculptures with "African Clothing" (Schneider 5–8), pastiching Gainsborough in *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without Their Heads* (1998), depicting the Berlin Conference in *Scramble for Africa* (2003), or re-staging historically white British paintings with black ethnicities, for example, in *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998), based on the narrative works of William Hogarth. His artworks try to redress the cultural amnesia of empire, colonialism, and slavery head on, and the "African-ness" of his textiles tells of a much more complicated situation than a simple signification would suggest. Shonibare's work attempts to question the notion of essentialized ethnic origins and to unravel the idea of a racially or ideologically fixed nation. *Britannia* at the Tate acknowledged the role that Africa played in the British Empire, re-contextualizing Britannia from the colonized perspective.

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Like Shonibare, London-based rapper Akala attempts to “decolonise the mind” (Ngũgĩ) through his art, espousing a postcolonial worldview that reinserts African¹ historical contributions, critiques past injustices, and addresses current inequalities. His lyrics often reflect a historically fuelled didacticism around pan-African solidarity and revolution which encourages his audience to help create change. This article focuses on the track “The Thieves Banquet” from the eponymous 2013 album and its critique of neocolonialism. His theatrical performance on these tracks, with their use of multi-accentuality and code combining with elements of Western classical music, creates a multi-layered and inter-medial hybrid text. As black vernacular forms such as hip hop have become a powerful site of (capitalist) critique (Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black* 155), Akala’s performative skills as a rapper allow him to present a complex and didactic allegory informed by imperial history, the literature of the global south, and the global financial crisis.

Akala, Shonibare, and other black British artists who negotiate multiple ethnic and/or national identities reflect what Joseph Roach has described as “counter-memories, or the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and meaning as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences” (qtd in Tolia-Kelly and Morris 155). Both artists are present-day postcolonial activists, and in their work they are able to think postcolonially. As Robert Young argues, “Postcolonialism names a politics and philosophy of activism that contests that disparity [of global economic inequality between Western and non-Western continents], and so continues in a new way the anti-colonial struggles of the past” (4). Shonibare and Akala want to raise awareness of Britain’s colonial past in a way that, as Angela McRobbie describes Shonibare’s work, enables “a return to history” (57). As members of the Black Atlantic, they share the social memory of slavery from the standpoint of the colonized and enslaved. In this sense, Akala applies postcolonial thinking to lyrics that espouse pan-African traditions and protest past imperial atrocities and current neocolonial conditions. His music shows what happens when the empire comes home, carrying reminders of the past that arguably contribute to a sense of “postcolonial melancholia” in post-imperial Britain (Gilroy, *After Empire* 99). Akala’s message is an attempt to awaken listeners to history and current inequalities and to leave Plato’s cave more enlightened.

With its origins in African-American culture, hip hop has spread to provide a medium through which marginalized peoples can belong in a “family of resemblances” while articulating their own variants of localized experiences (Lipsitz 33; Hill 183). While reminding us that there is nothing fundamentally exceptional about America as a postcolonial nation, Rollefson notes, “What is remarkable and unique is the way in which the postcolonial experience in America gained musical form in the contours of African American expressive culture in the colonial period, gained commodity form over the course of the nineteenth century, and ultimately gained a wider audience than any other music in history” (382). Hip hop has become a global force, used by countless individuals and groups to voice their counter-narratives, political and non-political. The links between past (colonialism and slavery) and present (neocolonialism) capitalist exploitation become a juncture in which Akala stages his performative critique showing that, for Akala, knowledge is power.

Akala

Rapper, public speaker, journalist, graphic novelist, and founder of the Hip-hop Shakespeare Company, Akala (b. 1983) is one of the MCs at the forefront of the UK’s thriving hip-hop

scene. Born Kingslee James Daley, the London-based rapper chose the stage name Akala because it is a Buddhist term meaning “Immovable.” As a child, Akala went to a pan-African Saturday school called the Winnie Mandela School in Camden (along with his sister Niomi, aka R&B artist and producer Ms Dynamite), and his stepfather was stage manager of the Hackney Empire, the leading African-Caribbean theatre at the time. He started his rap career as a grime MC, but, as time passed, his lyrics became more politically and socially conscious. He released his first album *It’s Not a Rumour* in 2006 followed by *Freedom Lasso* in 2007 and *DoubleThink* in 2010, and gained further notoriety on BBC Radio 1Xtra for “Fire in the Booth,” performed in 2011 and hosted by Charlie Sloth, that can be heard on his first mixtape *Knowledge is Power Vol. 1* (2012). His albums have highlighted numerous themes: the dystopian qualities of British society, racial inequality and stereotypes, the commercialism of US rap music, global wars, the importance of education, the prison industrial complex, Britain’s colonial past and the slave trade, black revolutionaries, capitalist corruption, inequalities of power, and the need for self-reliance. He owns his own record label, Illa State Records, so he is under little pressure from major record labels to perform particular identities, on or off-stage. His studio albums often include live bands drawing from a range of genres, and this polystylism arguably helps him avoid any subgeneric pigeonholing by the rap-music industry.

His pan-African education, in particular about the transatlantic slave trade and revolutionary leaders such as Marcus Garvey and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, informs his lyrics on tracks such as “Maangamizi” and “Malcolm Said it” (both on *The Thieves Banquet*). Black nationalism was a prominent influence in the 1980s and early 1990s US rap scene, when groups like the Jungle Brothers (e.g. “Acknowledge Your Own History”) and others associated with the Native Tongues collective (Queen Latifah, A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, X Clan) drew from black nationalist imagery: pan-African flags, graphics of the African continent in pan-African colors, African clothes, and iconography and teachings from strong black revolutionary leaders. Black nationalist hip hop and the results of his own pan-African educational background are therefore prominently foregrounded and convergent influences on his musical style. As Akala raps, “Come to my shows and some cry tears/It mean that much to em, it’s a movement!/I don’t speak for myself but a unit” (“Fire in the Booth”).

He often shows his music videos at live shows. “Malcolm Said It,” for example, is rife with imagery of black revolutionary leaders (many of whom are not part of history curricula in the UK), adding a visual dimension to his didacticism. As stated in his BBC Black and Asian Forum (BBAF) Mandela lecture, one purpose of his lyrics (and his lectures) is that the younger generation is taught these less sanitized histories and that they do not learn to idolize colonizers and imperialist history. He states:

The way we view and understand past injustices unquestionably colours the way we perceive and thus interact with today’s politics; and by exalting the resistance of everyday people, instead of colonizers by making plain, that unspeakable brutality of the world, we can push these same young minds to interact hopefully in ways that are less complicit with injustice. (Akala)

Akala’s track “Maangamizi” refers to the enslavement of the African people and the ensuing destruction. A Swahili expression, which translates as “destruction,” “doom,” and/or “annihilation,” “Maangamizi” discusses the African holocaust, forced migration, torture, and slavery in raw, powerful terms. He concludes that these injustices will stop only when current institutions of unequal power relationships cease to exist:

When we put a stop to false charity
 That gives with one hand and bombs with the other
 When the IMF and World Bank, along with their puppets
 No longer strangle our nations.
 When the invaders don't have military bases
 In so many places
 When the jail cells are not packed with Black backs
 And the gats and the crack are no longer factors
 When we celebrate true self-determination
 Not a few token bit part actors
 When the truth is told and there is
 The dignity to remember the dead
 Because as long as they are distorting the past
 It means they have the intention of doing it again.

Like Shonibare, who “explores the problem of historical omission and recurrence” (Schneider 5), Akala addresses African genocide as well as forced migration and displacement and links them to the recurrence of exploitation in the prison industrial complex; guns, drugs, and the culture of military intervention; and the corrupt relationship between national governments and international financial organizations.

The first verse opens with “Maangamizi, meaning African hellcaust/Because we paid a hell of a cost/And don't really know what was lost/And the process ain't ever stopped.” He cites atrocities, including the torture of black men and women, rape, and the use of black women for gynecological “research” (without anesthetic) as well as later developments such as Jim Crow and apartheid. Akala also questions educational systems that ignore both these histories and the lives of black revolutionaries: figures such as Haiti's Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who led the first successful slave revolution in 1804; Nanny of the Maroons, who escaped her plantation in Jamaica and started a community and helped to free over 800 slaves in 30 years; and Paul Bogle, a Jamaican Baptist deacon, who led the 1865 Morant Bay protest against widespread poverty, prejudice, and the lack of voting rights for black men and women. Additionally, Akala highlights ongoing racial inequality and the continuing dependence of “third world” nations (“They changed that much? Are you so sure? The world's darker people still the most poor?”). This overt link between past and present forms of imperialism, while questioning the “independent” status of “third world” nations, references writers such as Frantz Fanon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah since the 1960s. Akala updates the neocolonial critique presented by earlier thinkers, making the argument for liberation being as pressing as ever. While “Maangamizi” is the most lyrically overt example of this past-present link on *The Thieves Banquet*, the album's title track most theatrically demonstrates it.

Neocolonialism and “The Thieves Banquet”

Neocolonialism, a term coined by Ghanaian president Nkrumah in *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), is defined by John McLeod as “the perpetuation of a nation's subservience to the interests of Europe, supported by an indigenous elite, after colonialism has formally ended” (108). While a postcolonial state may look independent politically, it may still be controlled by outside forces, and usually economic ones. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon wrote of his concern that the newly independent nation could be compromised by what he called the educated national middle class who pursue their

own interests rather than help their country's people (120–21). Akala cites the examples of South Africa and Haiti, two countries with celebrated revolutions in different eras. In post-apartheid South Africa, the South African Central Bank became independent, but it continued to be run by the same man in control under apartheid. The bank's debt had to be serviced by the new African National Congress “to the tune of 4.5 billion US dollars per year” (Akala). Haiti staged the first successful slave revolution (1791–1804), yet under the threat of re-invasion from France in 1825, had to pay 91 million francs “from a loss of property” and the former slave colony labored to pay the debt to its colonizers until 1947 (Akala).

The literature of the global south had a direct influence on Akala's work. For example, the story of Akala's “The Thieves Banquet” was inspired by Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Caitani Mũtharaba-inĩ* (*Devil on the Cross*) (Edwards).² The novel tells of a student witnessing a banquet in a cave hosted by the Devil for local and foreign capitalists in Kenya who have mortgaged the nation to foreign capital, and become fat, wealthy, and boastful. The novel is a Marxist critique of postcolonial Kenya, its new leaders, and corruption under capitalism, as well as middle-class intellectualism. The wealthy elites under capitalism believe in “the democracy of drinking the blood and eating the flesh of workers and peasants” (89), and they “encourage the growth of a class of eaters of other people's products...a class of man-eaters—in our own land” (168). The book is also a political satire on neocolonial Kenya, addressed to “all Kenyans struggling against the neo-colonial stage of imperialism” (1). In the novel, the masses unite against injustice and chase the capitalists out of the cave, pointing toward the possibility of revolution.

Akala's track, however, moves well outside Kenya, providing a more global allegory devoid of specific geographical markers other than in its introduction: “Once upon a time in an obscure part of the Milky Way Galaxy, there was a spinning ball of water and rock ruled by the forces of evil.” The narrator goes on to explain that the Devil decided to hold a banquet for the greatest thieves of the world:

He sent invites to thousands of the greatest murders, rapists and general-assorted scum, inviting them to attend his palace at the dawn of the new moon. Each thief would be given a chance to stake his claim as the greatest messenger of murder upon the planet, and the Devil himself would then decide who should be crowned king.

After many days of deliberating, all of the petty thieves, such as street criminals, have been found far short of the required level of wickedness and there were just four sets of thieves left in the competition.

They were: the monarchs of empire, a cartel of bankers, the heads of religious orders, and the third-world dictators. Each set of thieves appointed a spokesman to give his case to the Devil. We have recorded these events for posterity.

Akala, as narrator, frames the story from the outset, and then performs as the different characters using a different English accent for each (for the overall structure of the track, see Table 1). Similar to Uganda's President Idi Amin, Akala's dictator of the third world nation brags in an African English accent that he came to power in a military coup, can murder his people at will while telling them to worship colonizers, and has a bank account in Switzerland. The verse is accompanied by Romantic-style piano phrases over the song's basic beat. The monarch of empire asks, “who do you think...trained these amateur dictators to act this way?” The monarch brags of the death, mass enslavement, and deliberate starvation of whole nations. The thieves do not have to touch money; it is all handled for

Table 1. Formal Structure of “The Thieves Banquet”.

Formal Unit	Character	Accent	Musical Features
Introduction (0:00–1:36)	Narrator	Multicultural youth English (MYE)	Strings
Verse 1 (1:37–2:30) Chorus (2:31–2:44)	Third world dictator	African English Backward vocal placement (heavy throat tone)	Romantic-style piano English choral technique Keyboard upbeats Violoncello
Verse 2 (2:44–3:32) Chorus (3:32–3:44)	Monarch of empire	Received pronunciation (with some slang and MYE elements) Backward vocal placement (heavy throat tone)	English choral technique Keyboard upbeats Church organ
Verse 3 (3:44–4:33)	Head of religious order	Breathy received pronunciation	
Verse 4 (4:34–5:28)	Head of banking cartel	Received pronunciation (most theatrical delivery)	Operatic voice in background
Double Chorus (5:29–6:36)		Backward vocal placement (heavy throat tone)	English choral technique Keyboard upbeats Caribbean MC singing in outro

them (“So blingin’ out of control you would vomit/Don’t even touch dough, but my face is on it!”). Strings accompany this verse. The third thief, a “pervert hiding under the cloak [of] the clergy,” brags that, despite widespread pedophilia, no offender has been jailed. With church organ (stereotypically) accompanying the next verse, the priest boasts about these crimes, committed with the blessing of the church.

The last thief is the head of a cartel of bankers, bragging in a received pronunciation accent and accompanied by a female operatic voice in the background:

I think I’m the biggest sinner
 All of those three depend on me
 All they ever do is defending me
 Cos I paid for all of the things they have
 Of course, and all of the lives they lead
 Paid for the guns, bombs and the tanks
 That’s why you see, there is always more
 Never fired a gun but millions die because of him, no one knows what he looks like...
 I hold the keys to every single door
 Sell sex and drugs, profit and lies
 Earth and skies, I’ll even sell life
 I’ll even sell freedom for the right price
 But no one is smart enough to ask me nice
 So Mr. Devil, give me the medal
 Don’t be biased
 If you don’t give it to me
 I’ll just BUY IT!

The Devil declares the last speaker the winner, suggesting that Akala finds those who control economic power and help create inequality in the world to be the most evil. In addition to past economic exploitation during the slave trade and the corruption outlined in *Devil on the Cross*, one cannot help but think that the 2008 financial crisis also influenced Akala’s critique. Caused in part by a lack of financial regulation on property mortgages (and the greed and exploitation inherent in loans such as sub-prime mortgages), this economic crisis was then lessened by bail-outs from national governments. The track clearly demonstrates the link between politics and capitalist interests. Furthermore, the album’s artwork depicts

the all-male guests at the banquet feasting on severed human heads and limbs, visually depicting Ngũgĩ's "man-eaters" surrounded by images of poverty, war, and money. Unlike Ngũgĩ's novel, however, "The Thieves Banquet" includes no collective representation of the masses. The final track of the album, entitled "The Thieves Banquet Part II (bonus track)," describes the end of the banquet: the Devil decides to retire and all the thieves make a pact to work together, while dining on a final course of murdered children, drinking the still-warm blood, and laughing and toasting their future success.

Akala's performative role as narrator and also the four other characters in the story might suggest his self-construction as an African-based trickster figure (as some suggested about Eminem's three persona; see Nielsen). Indeed, Akala's performance demonstrates an ability to play multiple roles with adept authenticity and virtuosity. Given Akala's emphasis on didacticism in his work, however, the performance is perhaps best considered an allegory that reflects the "national allegory" of *The Devil on the Cross*, echoing writers such as Fredric Jameson who believe that all "Third World" texts are allegorical (69).³ Akala's allegory, in contrast, resists time and place in the interest of a more globalized critique while being firmly embedded sonically in the world of Western popular and classical music. The relationship between the monarch of empire and the third world dictator addresses the issue of "mimicry" ("Who do you think trained this amateur dictator to behave this way?"), most eloquently expounded by Homi Bhabha in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man," where the colonized mimic aspects of the colonizer as a "form of colonial discourse" (89). Furthermore, the banker as "winner" in the banquet echoes the Marxist critique in Ngũgĩ's novel. The line "no one knows who I look like" echoes Nkrumah's comments that neocolonialism is the worst type of colonialism because it accepts "power without responsibility" (x). It is not a coincidence that the accent used is that of received pronunciation, representing standard "Queen's English" with its associations with the wealthy elite. The four accents, as well as Akala's own voice as narrator, provide an example of Voloshinov's concept of "multi-accentuality," the idea that language produces different meanings dependent on how it is "accented" by those who utter it in a given context (Proctor 31). These utterances, as always, will be fully decoded by those with knowledge of the varying English accents and their connotations.

Multi-accentuality and Multicultural Youth English in "The Thieves Banquet"

The accents in "The Thieves Banquet" are different from Akala's standard idiolect when rapping, and more akin to what linguists call multicultural youth English or multicultural London English (MLE) (see Kerswill). Akala's third world dictator's accent resembles the dialect of African English, and the clergyman uses received pronunciation with a breathy, villainous delivery (like the British-accented villains of Hollywood film). The banker has the most theatrical and performative form of received pronunciation, which is markedly different from that of the monarch of empire. For example, the monarch uses colloquial phrases such as "blingin' out of control" and pronounces "things" as "tings." The use of black vernacular cultural codes within these stereotyped accents not only represents the presence of linguistic traces from the history of empire, but also what Nabeel Zubieri calls "code combining" rather than code switching for UK-based MCs (Zubieri 191). MLE is in itself a combination of elements, representative of the hybridities of multicultural Britain. The banker, who does pronounce the "th" in "things" ("Cos I paid for all of the *things* they have"), may be more distanced from historical reality and his accent adds to his "invisibility."⁴

The use of MLE, like stylized Turkish-German or African-American vernacular English, can be perceived as a resistance vernacular (Mitchell 41–54; Reinhardt-Byrd 292–93), in opposition to prestige varieties such as received pronunciation. MLE is a sociolect, a set of accent and dialect characteristics, which also signifies a particular social and economic class. In a sense, Akala is rejecting the stereotype of MLE given the high intellectual content of lyrics spoken in an accent associated with a less-educated class. Associated with a migrant language, the language of Jamaican immigrants primarily, it is perhaps predictable that articles in the *Daily Mail* express anxiety that MLE has spread well beyond the perceived “Other” (Harding). The theatrically “over-the-top” received pronunciation accent that uses phrases from black vernacular is analogous to Shonibare’s paintings, a switch in codes which resists and disrupts stereotypes, showing perspectives from the other side of the power relationship, thus demonstrating that the two are inextricably intertwined. This hyperbolic performativity resists the everyday performative, pedagogic (Bhabha 209), nationalist and other essentialized dominant discourses in both Britain and wider international communities.

While the soundscapes of a number of tracks on the album interrogate distinctions between elite and vernacular vocalizations and represent a polystylism that makes it difficult to pin down an overall musical style, the allusion to Western classical music on “The Thieves Banquet” requires further investigation.⁵ The multi-tracked singer of the chorus is clearly alluding to the British “choral tradition” in chant, religious choral music, or other forms of “early music,” a style that has developed, in particular, in post-World War II Britain (Day). Examples of this style in popular music include the chant in the opening of Enigma’s “Sadeness” (1990) and the unnamed, possibly sampled, singing voice at the opening of Justin Timberlake’s “Cry Me a River” (2002). This choral style is defined by backward vocal production rather than “forward singing,” through the backward placement of the singing voice and vocal production with a heavy throat tone (Coward 39). It also has sonic associations with what Melanie Lowe calls the “gothic choral aesthetic” (e.g. Verdi and Mozart requiems), often used for an “epic” sound in film music. And yet we should not read the notion of “classical music” too literally here, as we are dealing with a pastiche of the Western classical style. As in Shonibare’s work, Akala’s track echoes the artist’s own assertion that “my work remains critical of the relations of power through parody, excess and complicity” (qtd in Tolia-Kelly and Morris 155). While writers such as Amiri Baraka have long dealt with the trope of white appropriation of black forms such as jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip hop (e.g. Paul Whiteman, Elvis, Eminem), Akala’s appropriation of European music flips the historical notion of cultural-economic appropriation and empire on its head. Such a reading, however, may be too simplistic in light of Akala’s sonic message, and cannot be solely based on notions of appropriation. The beat is, in reality, extremely hybrid. The sound of the whip which forms part of the “basic beat” configuration is powerful in itself, but the choruses see it combined with reverb-laden keyboard upbeats reminiscent of dub and reggae, and there is a Caribbean MC-style voice at the end of “The Thieves Banquet,” and a female operatic voice in verse four. The beat of the track, moreover, is a musical analogue for the code combining in the lyrical delivery.

The European classical choral voice obviously represents the soundtrack of the elite, alluding to a compositional style of Western European classical works that were written at the height of colonialist territorial expansion and are firmly associated with high art. While the soundtrack could be said to represent the music of the thieves (and the enemy),⁶ it is, however, also the medium that conveys Akala’s message. There may be an inherent tension

between the critique of empire and the pleasures of the music, but protest songs have always dealt with such tension. In fact, such a tension may be reflective of the ambivalence inherent in postcolonialism itself (Bhabha 85). As numerous cultural studies theorists have noted, popular culture can never be fully separated from the dominant institutions and cultures that helped to shape it (Proctor 45–46), and Akala's powerful critique of capitalism on a for-profit popular music recording demonstrates this contradiction. As Hall reminds us, culture is a crucial site of social action, a site of ongoing struggle where power relations are formed, critiqued, and potentially unraveled. Akala's counter-narratives of dominant forms of history and storytelling are necessarily hybrid, necessarily ambivalent in their pleasure and discomfort, musically navigating the same routes and roots that London's global citizens negotiate daily.

Hip Hop, Performance, and Theatricality

The Thieves Banquet was launched on 26 April 2013 at the Tate Modern with a live performance by Akala and his band and a digital art installation of the cover art for the album by Japanese artist Tokio Aoyama. Like Shonibare's work at Tate Britain, these artists rewrite, or create a palimpsest over, the imperial-funded institutions in Britain, producing another site of postcolonial ambivalence, akin to artists who receive royal honors such as an OBE (Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) or MBE (Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire). To refuse such a title (as poet Benjamin Zephaniah did) is to refuse imperialism and its history. To accept it (as Shonibare did) is to acknowledge that the individuals' contributions to and membership in the British Empire (and the United Kingdom) go beyond a (tacit) identification with white ethnicity. This acceptance/refusal dichotomy is, however, far too reductive for postcolonial Britain, a Britannia draped in "African" textiles. The "graffiti" around the Edward Colston statue in my hometown of Bristol paints an even more apt picture. Born in Bristol, Colston was a member of the Society of Merchant Venturers in the 17th and 18th centuries, and helped eradicate the London-based monopoly on trade, opening up ports like Bristol and Liverpool to global goods, including slaves. In recent years, the statue has included someone scrawling "slave trader" under his list of achievements, using dripping red paint to signify blood, and a shackle around Colston's wrist and gold chains around his neck. These interventions, or the rewriting of dominant history within the dominant forms themselves, may be likened to protest art that uses the Western forms of the novel, the commercial music recording, or the art gallery. It reminds us of the syncretic connection of past and present, history as less distanced than is presented in more mainstream narratives.

In a review of *The Thieves Banquet* in 2013, Killian Fox writes that "[n]uance is sometimes sacrificed for theatrical effect, particularly on the title track, but Akala's intricate flow is so engaging it rarely matters." It is worth acknowledging the theatricality of the album and "The Thieves Banquet" in particular, and its consequences for thinking about hip hop's music-lyric dichotomy. Rarely do hip-hop scholars consider "performance" or the fact that rappers often play a role, even if their own persona is loosely based on real life. The theatricality of hip hop as a performance art, not only for hip-hop theatre (Persley 85), but also for hip-hop culture as a whole, is an important element for "The Thieves Banquet" and its critiques. Furthermore, if a concept of "theatricality" is the key to analyzing the relationship between music and lyrical delivery ("beat and flow"), as in theatre or a radio play, the music becomes crucial to meaning, but also incidental. Not all rap music, I would argue, has an

unequal relationship between music and lyrical delivery—in some cases, there is an equal relation or, at other times, the music/beat is foregrounded (in music produced for club dancing, for example), and much of this interplay is dependent on the listener. “The Thieves Banquet,” in contrast, places an emphasis on “staged” performance (a sonic stage, but a stage nonetheless). In a didactic allegory, highlighting the lyrics is what matters, and the music can add a sense of drama without “getting in the way.” Given his founding of the Hip-hop Shakespeare Company, Akala’s notion of theatricality is certainly not absent from the track.⁷

Conclusion

Akala inherits the legacy of the pan-Africanist movement and uses a notion of black nationalism to educate listeners on the atrocities of empire, past and present.⁸ He adapts and translates allegory from literature of the global south such as, in particular, Ngũgĩ’s Marxist critique of neocolonial Kenya in *Devil on the Cross*. Akala’s didactic revolutionary rhetoric falls into the “knowledge rap” (Krim 79) tradition from a number of US hip-hop artists and groups who are often labeled “conscious” rap artists, given that Afrika Bambaataa dubbed “knowledge” as the “fifth element” of hip hop (Gosa 56). Akala shares such an approach with black British artists like Shonibare who re-inserts African contributions into narratives of the British Empire and reflects Black Atlantic perspectives so eloquently explored by black British intellectuals such as Hall and Gilroy, though I would argue that Akala’s strategy is much more essentialist than Shonibare’s. Akala’s provocative counter-narrative complicates race-based notions of Britishness, itself an elusive concept given Britain’s imperial past. Akala retrieves forgotten or neglected histories, expressed in the black resistance vernacular of multicultural youth English, reclaiming identity in light of the “post-colonial melancholia” felt by those who lament the loss of empire.

As Paul Gilroy has most persuasively written about youth cultures and postcolonial Britain, “Given the extent of Britain’s deepening economic and social divisions, it is perhaps surprising that the convivial metropolitan cultures of the country’s young people are still a bulwark against the machinations of racial politics. This enduring quality of resistance of the young is no trivial matter” (*After Empire*, 132–33). Postcolonial discourses, therefore, can be used to tease out invisible histories, while using a black vernacular critique of current social and economic inequalities. Such counter-narratives are in fact too integrated to be separate from more dominant ones. What Akala presents in his rap music, among other things, echoes Gilroy’s observation that “[w]e may discover that our story is not the *other* story after all, but *the* story of England in the modern world” (“Art of Darkness” 52).

Notes

1. I use the term African throughout this paper, while I am consciously aware that many thinkers use “Afrikan” instead of “African” to echo activists who believe Africa is a European imposed construction of the continent rather than an Afrika-centered perspective.
2. In an interview with Simone Eleshia Edwards, he states that the title of *The Thieves Banquet* “came about as I was reading a novel by a Kenyan author which was called *Devil on the Cross*” (2013). Numerous tweets from his twitter account (@Akalamusic) in March 2013 praise Ngũgĩ’s novel for its insight and humor.
3. Jameson’s “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” is not without important problematizations of his rhetoric. See Ahmad for an important critique.

4. The banker's received pronunciation accent is similar to that of Akala's character pompous Peterson, who introduces himself thus: "My name is pompous Peterson and I am heir to the 'Print Money When You Like—Fund Genocide at Will' Banking Dynasty." He also briefly appears at live shows, signified by the accent and his costume of white dress jacket and cane, and proceeds to chastise any "immigrants" and "chavs" in the audience. A promotional video for *The Thieves Banquet* entitled "Pompous Peterson freestyle" goes into more detail on how to become an excellent thief: "Speak proper English, you'll go further, The accent of legitimate murder.") Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6GO0WtECFA>
5. This is not the only instance of Akala sampling or borrowing from Western classical music. The track "Psycho" (from *DoubleThink*, 2010) presents the complexity of his feelings, and makes a direct association with classical music and the violence undertaken by Western European empires: "I know what it is that's got me feeling so violent lately. It's all this classical music I've been listening to"; then we hear a harpsichord phrase with four chords arpeggiated (no doubt reversing the often-cited critiques that "black" rap music is harmful for (white) youth to listen to because it promotes violence). On the track "Educated Tug Shit," on *Knowledge is Power 1* (2012), he samples Vivaldi's Concerto No. 4 in F minor, Op. 8, RV 297, third movement allegro, "L'inverno" (Winter), in which the sample is performed at a different tempo from the rest of the beat, creating a disorientating effect.
6. Classical music has been used to represent villainy in other contexts, as written about by Carlo Cenciarelli in respect of the use of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" by Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* (107–34).
7. I have written elsewhere that rapper/jazz saxophonist Soweto Kinch owes a debt to the influence of BBC Radio 4 radio plays in some of his work, and that this aspect of British culture could be more influential on artists than has previously been thought (Williams 141–43).
8. Akala's concern with history and contemporary social issues represents an overtly political engagement found in some, but not all, UK hip hop. As Mark Slater has written about the Streets (aka Mike Skinner), for example, the music's lyrical content represents a "non-radical didacticism" concerned more with the mundane than with global politics (Slater 360). Grime music similarly concerns itself with the everyday and is arguably less didactic, with an emphasis on fun, braggadocio, and personal relations (Bramwell 10). While politically important for giving a voice to grime artists, as well as an element of financial empowerment and success, the genre would fall under Adam Krims's designation of "party rap" rather than politically tinged rap genres (58). And, while George Lipsitz finds Gilroy's notion of the "diasporic intimacy" of the Black Atlantic within hip hop (27), postcolonial Britain engages with not only "black" voices but also South Asian (e.g. Jay Sean, Panjabi MC) and Middle Eastern (e.g. Shadia Mansour, Lowkey, Reveal) diasporas, not to mention Celtic fringe marginalities in Welsh (e.g. Y Diwygiad) and Scottish (e.g., Stanley Odd, Hector Bizerk) hip hop to name but a few examples in a wide nexus of UK hip-hop diversity.

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